

ANXIETY IN ORAL ENGLISH CLASSROOMS: A CASE STUDY IN CHINA

Meihua Liu

*Department of Foreign Languages
Tsinghua University, Beijing*

Abstract

This paper reports the result of a case study on anxiety in oral English classrooms in a Chinese university. By way of survey and reflective journals, the study revealed that (1) anxiety was experienced by a considerable number of students when speaking English in class, (2) the students reported to be the most anxious when singled out to speak English in class or giving presentations at the front while the least during pair work, (3) a multitude of variables such as lack of vocabulary, low English proficiency and memory disassociation contributed to student anxiety in class, and (4) most students felt helpless about being anxious when speaking English in class. Finally, some suggestions were discussed in order to help students reduce anxiety and become more confident to speak English in oral language classrooms, thus ultimately enhance their learning of oral English.

Keywords: anxiety, oral English classroom, Chinese University

INTRODUCTION

Interest in affective variables of second/foreign language teaching and learning, which had been emergent since the 1970s (Brown, 1973; Lozanov, 1978), was brought to the fore by Krashen's (1982) hypothesis that stressful classroom environments contributed to a "filter" blocking easy acquisition of the target language. Krashen (1982) hypothesized that anxiety contributed negatively to an "affective filter", which made an individual less responsive to language input. This principle exerted considerable influence on communicative teaching approaches in subsequent years. Since then, hundreds of research articles have touched upon the issue which invariably find that foreign language anxiety is more associated with public speaking and mainly functions as an inhibitor in language learning (Bailey, 1983; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Horwitz, 1995; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999).

In order to identify anxious university students and measure their anxiety, Horwitz et al. (1986) developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which comprises three dimensions—communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation.

The scale was administered to 75 Spanish learners of English at an American university. The study revealed that significant foreign language anxiety was experienced by many students in foreign language learning, which adversely affected their performance in that language. Thirty three percent of the subjects endorsed the item “I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class”, and 28% agreed that “I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students”. Almost half of the students reported that they started to panic when they had to speak without preparation in the target language. Meanwhile, 47% of the subjects rejected the statement “I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class”. According to the researchers, language anxiety manifested itself when students avoided conveying complex messages in the foreign language, when they displayed a lack of confidence or froze up in role-play activities, and when they forgot previously learned vocabulary or grammar in evaluative situations.

These findings were supported by numerous later studies using a similar research method (Aida, 1994; Bailey *et al.*, 1999; Chen, 2002; Cheng *et al.*, 1999; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Kitano, 2001; MacIntyre *et al.*, 1997; Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 1999; Wang & Ding, 2001; Yan & Wang, 2001). In order to explore the relationship among language anxiety, perceived competence and actual competence, MacIntyre *et al.* (1997) recruited 37 English learners of French at a bilingual university in Canada, all of whom had considerable exposure to French, their L2. The participants completed a questionnaire followed by a series of French proficiency tests during the testing session. It was revealed that those students who produced more output tended to produce better output and that those who were more proficient tended to perceive themselves as more proficient. In addition, all the correlations involving language anxiety were found to be negative. As language anxiety scores increased, the ratings of ideas expressed, output quality, and self-rated competence declined. Moreover, these relations were consistent across speaking, reading, writing and comprehension tasks, indicating a strong relationship between language anxiety and measures of language achievement. It was also found that anxious students tended to underestimate their ability and more relaxed students tended to overestimate their ability. Highly anxious students did not perceive their competence to be as high as a more objective analysis revealed it to be. The arousal of anxiety probably made some students more reluctant to speak.

Meanwhile, many researchers have become interested in exploring causes for student anxiety in second/foreign language classrooms through qualitative data (Bailey, 1983; Hilleson, 1996; Jackson, 2002; Price, 1991; Tsui, 1996). They found that a multitude of variables contributed to student anxiety such as low English proficiency, lack of practice, competition, and task difficulty, which might vary from context to context. Bailey (1983) examined the diaries she kept while studying French as a foreign language in a low-level college reading class in America. She found that there was quite much competitiveness on her part and that she often compared herself to the other students in the class. This comparison caused or aggravated her fear of public failure. She concluded that competitiveness was often accompanied by anxiety and hindered her French learning though sometimes it appeared to be facilitating. The same conclusion was drawn when the researcher reviewed other people's published diaries. Hilleson (1996) investigated 5 young international students attending a college in Singapore in way of diaries, interviews, observations, and questionnaires. He found that the awareness of performing badly in English seemed to indicate a loss of self-esteem. The students were aware that their performance was being evaluated by their peers and teachers, which made them very anxious in learning. The fear of missing important information was also a source of student anxiety. As a result, the students did not participate in any debates or artistic performances in the early part of the term. Furthermore, speaking was frequently mentioned as an anxiety-provoking event. Some students felt very self-conscious about their pronunciation when speaking English; some found it frustrating to "jump into" a discussion. Apparently, foreign language anxiety existed and interfered the students' learning and affected reactions, although it might motivate some students to work harder sometimes.

All these findings reveal that foreign language anxiety is a phenomenal issue and mainly a negative factor in language learning. The differences in foreign language learning situations and variance in underlying causes for foreign language classroom anxiety require that more research be needed to examine students' anxiety levels, causes for and consequences of anxiety, and their relationships with language proficiency in various second/foreign language learning contexts.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

In the past decade or so, China has emerged as a powerhouse in English language teaching because English is now a required subject from Grade 3 onwards and estimates are that more than 225 million students are

enrolled in primary, secondary, and university levels in China (Mu, 2004; Zhang & Luan, 2002). Enrollment in a foreign language class has long become an essential part of a college student's program of study. Unfortunately, taking such courses can be an intimidating experience for some students (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 1999). Thus, the investigation of anxiety is of special importance to these students, especially non-English majors who usually have little contact with and few chances to use the target language in their daily life.

Focusing on one case with a target on Chinese undergraduate non-English majors, this research aimed to examine student anxiety in oral English classrooms. To achieve this, three research questions were proposed:

- (1) To what extent do the students experience anxiety in oral English classrooms and what activity makes them the most anxious?
- (2) What factors contribute to student anxiety during oral English lessons?
- (3) What strategies do the students use to cope with anxiety in oral English classrooms?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants. One intact band-3¹ class of 27 first-year non-English majors enrolled in the *English Listening & Speaking* Course in a Chinese university in Beijing was invited for the study. Twenty-four (21 male and 3 female) of them, with an average age of 18.5, actually participated in the study (the other three did not fill in the questionnaire due to absence). Of these participants, 45.8% (11) of them started to learn English in the primary school and 54.2% (13) started in the junior high school. On the other hand, only 16.7% (4) of them started to learn spoken English in the primary school, 41.7% (10) started in the junior high school, 29.2% (7) in the senior high school and 12.4% (3) in the university. Coming from different departments such as Computer and Civil Engineering, these students met once a week for the lesson, which lasted 90 minutes per week.

Instrument. *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale.* To suit the foreign language learning situation in Mainland China, several modifications were made in the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz *et al.* (1986). The words "language" and "foreign language" used in the original FLCAS were consistently replaced with "English". For example, the original FLCAS item "It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in a

foreign language” was modified to be “It frightens me when I don’t understand what the teacher is saying in English”. In addition, four more items were added to better reflect the situation in Chinese English classrooms such as “I get tense and nervous when I have to discuss things unfamiliar to me” and “I feel overwhelmed by the number of words I have to learn to speak English”. Designed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from ‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree’, all the items were translated into Chinese before being implemented.

Background information. The background questionnaire was designed to obtain demographic data about the participants: name, gender, age, department, and length of English study.

Reflective journals. Reflective journals were used in the present study to provide additional data about personal and affective variables in language learning (Allwright, 1983; Bailey, 1983). The participants were asked to write journals (1 entry per week) for eight successive weeks to reflect and comment on their English learning experiences with a focus on their participation in classroom activities, feelings when speaking English in different activities, and strategies to become more active and less anxious. For each journal entry, topics and requirements were provided beforehand. In addition to the topics suggested, they could write about other aspects related to their language learning experiences. In case the students might have difficulty understanding the guide in English, it was translated into Chinese before being implemented.

Procedure. The study was conducted during the second term of the academic year of 2002-2003. In the first lesson, the teacher briefly described the need to keep writing journals on English learning experiences. She also told the students that each journal entry would be commented on and returned by the end of the term. The topics for each week’s writing in both Chinese and English were given to the students beforehand. The students started to write journals in the second week and 25 sets of journals were collected by the end of the eleventh week (two students didn’t finish all the journals and thus theirs were not considered for later analysis). In the middle of the term, the participants completed the questionnaire in Chinese in 6 minutes during the normal teaching period.

Data analysis. Because of the small number of respondents, the survey was analyzed mainly in terms of percentage. The reflective journals, on the other hand, were subjected to content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Anxiety Levels

Table 1 summarizes the students' responses to the FLCAS items, which are reflective of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation in the oral English classroom. All percentages refer to the number of students who strongly disagreed or strongly agreed with the statements (percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number).

Table 1: FLCAS Items with Percentages of Students Selecting Each Alternative (N = 24)

	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in my class.	0	37.5	33.3	29.2	0
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in the English class.	0	8.3	50	12.5	29.2
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in the English class.	12.5	41.7	33.3	12.5	0
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.	4.2	25	41.7	29.2	0
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.	25	29.2	33.3	4.2	8.3
6. During my English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	25	58.3	12.5	4.2	0
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.	8.3	25.2	33.3	29.2	4.2
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in the English class.	4.2	16.7	29.2	41.7	8.3
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.	4.2	29.2	16.7	41.7	8.3
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over English classes.	8.3	29.2	45.8	12.5	4.2
12. In the English class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	16.7	29.2	37.5	16.7	0
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	4.2	29.2	29.2	37.5	0
14. I would not be nervous speaking English with native speakers.	8.3	33.3	25	33.3	0
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	4.2	16.7	12.5	66.7	0
16. Even if I am well prepared for the English class, I feel anxious about it					

	16.7	58.3	16.7	4.2	4.2
17. I often feel like not going to my English class.	25	50	12.5	12.5	0
18. I feel confident when I speak English in class.	4.2	29.2	45.8	20.8	0
19. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	12.5	58.3	20.8	8.3	0
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in the English class.	4.2	12.5	29.2	45.8	8.3
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for the English class.	12.5	25	33.3	25	4.2
23. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	8.3	25	33.3	29.2	4.2
24. I feel very anxious about speaking English in front of other students.	12.5	54.2	29.2	4.2	0
25. The English class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	12.5	50	29.2	4.2	4.2
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes.	12.5	29.2	25	33.3	0
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English in class.	12.5	50	33.3	4.2	0
28. When I'm on my way to the English class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	4.2	20.8	62.5	8.3	4.2
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.	8.3	37.5	20.8	33.3	0
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English.	12.5	37.5	41.7	8.3	0
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	12.5	45.8	25	16.7	0
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of English.	8.3	16.7	50	16.7	8.3
33. I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	0	12.5	33.3	54.2	0
34. I get tense and nervous when I have to discuss things unfamiliar to me.	4.2	37.5	20.8	37.5	0
35. I feel overwhelmed by the number of words I have to learn to speak English.	8.3	29.2	20.8	29.2	12.5
36. I feel more anxious speaking English in pairs than in groups.	25	45.8	29.2	0	0
37. I feel confident and relaxed when giving presentations in front of the class.	4.2	50	33.3	12.5	0

Note: SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; N = neither agree nor disagree
A = agree; SA = strongly agree

According to Table 1, the respondents endorsed the FLCAS items indicative of speech anxiety such as “I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in my class (item 1)” (29.2%); “I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class (item 9)” (50%); and “I can feel my heart pounding when I’m going to be called on in the English class (item 20)” (54.1%). They rejected statements like “I feel confident when I speak English in class (item 18)” (33.4%) and “I feel confident and relaxed when giving presentations in front of others” (item 37) (54.2%). Anxious students reported that they were afraid to speak and felt deeply self-conscious when asked to risk revealing themselves by speaking English in the presence of other people.

The fact that anxious students feared they would not understand all the language input was also consistent with communication apprehension. Students agreed with statements “I get upset when I don’t understand what the teacher is correcting (item 15)” (66.7%); “It frightens me when I don’t understand what the teacher is saying in English (item 4)” (29.2%); and “I get nervous when I don’t understand every word the English teacher says (item 29)” (33.3%). They believed that in order to comprehend the target language message they must understand every word that was spoken.

Anxious students also feared being less competent than other students or being negatively evaluated. They reported “I keep thinking that other students are better at English than I am (item 7)” (33.4%); “I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do (item 23)” (33.4%); “It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class (item 13)” (37.5%); and “I worry about the consequences of failing my English class (item 10)” (50.1%). However, these students, unlike those in Horwitz *et al.*’s (1986) study, didn’t fear making mistakes and being corrected by the teacher. They supported the statement “I don’t worry about making mistakes in the English class (item 2)” (41.7%) while disagreeing with “I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make (item 19)” (70.8%). These students seemed to expect that their mistakes would be pointed out and corrected by their teacher.

Student responses to four FLCAS items—“I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English (item 30)” (8.3%), “I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes (item 26)” (33.3%), “I get tense and nervous when I have to discuss things unfamiliar to me in English (item 34)” (37.5%), and “I feel overwhelmed by the number of words I have to learn to speak English (item 35)” (41.7%)—further supported the view that foreign language anxiety was a distinct set of beliefs, perceptions, and feelings in response to foreign language learning in the classroom (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986).

In summary, among the 37 statements reflective of foreign language anxiety, 14 were supported by a third or more of the students surveyed, and 7 were supported by over half the students. This suggests that significant foreign language anxiety was experienced by many students in response to at least some aspects of foreign language learning, like that reported in previous studies (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992; Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, 2001).

This tendency that was indicated in the survey was further supported by the students' self-reports in reflective journals, which is reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Student Anxiety Reflected in Journals (N = 24)

Nervous	A little	Sometimes	Nervous even	Not nervous	Better with	Not
	Nervous	nervous	with preparation	with preparation	preparation	nervous
N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)
14(56%)	4(16%)	6(24%)	10(40%)	5(20%)	6(24%)	4(16%)

As can be seen from Table 2, some students didn't feel nervous at all when speaking English in class. Some students didn't "think there is anything worthy to be afraid of speaking English" (Gao, female). Some took it as a good chance to practice their spoken English, as a student wrote, "I'm happy and excited to speak English, not afraid of it. Because English as a language is a method of communicating. I'm never nervous when I'm speaking English in front of others although my English is poor" (Wang, male). Most of them felt relaxed during pair work, as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Students' Anxiety in Different Classroom Activities (N = 24)

	Pair work N(%)	Group work N(%)	Answering questions/presentations N(%)
Most anxious in	0	0	22(88%)
Least/Not anxious in	21(84%)	19(76%)	4(16%)

It can also be seen from Table 3 that the majority of the students felt the most anxious when answering questions or giving presentations in class while the least anxious during pair work and group work.

Meanwhile, as shown in Table 2, more than 70% of the students reported to feel nervous or a little nervous when speaking English in class due to various reasons. Many reflected that their brain went blank when speaking English in class, especially when they were not prepared. “I’ll [become] nervous if I’m asked to speak English because I don’t have any train of thought in my mind and I speak every sentence without any order” (Ying, female). “I’m afraid of speaking English. I’m so nervous when speaking English except that I’m alone” (Sha, male). Preparation, though not necessarily helping to eliminate anxiety, certainly made them feel better when speaking English in class. No preparation, however, made some students so anxious that they couldn’t speak out even one word (Li, male).

CAUSES FOR ANXIETY IN ORAL ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

As discussed before, a considerable number of students became anxious when speaking English in class, especially when singled out to answer questions or give presentations. When asked to comment on what caused them to become anxious when speaking English in class, the students identified a multitude of variables such as low English proficiency, lack of practice, difficulty of the task, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and incomprehensible input, similar to previous studies (Hilleson, 1996; Jackson, 2002; Tsui, 1996).

Lack of Vocabulary

As claimed by Cortazzi and Jin (1994) that Chinese English learners often thought vocabulary was a big obstacle for their English learning, lack of vocabulary was identified as a main cause for student anxiety in oral English classrooms by the participants in the present study. “I’m a little afraid of speaking English because my vocabulary is poor and I’m a little shy, so I often feel nervous when speaking in front of others” (Rao, male). “I can’t speak on when suddenly I come to a new word I never knew. How shy I will be!” (Chen, male). Statements like this clearly indicate that the students often became nervous in oral class due to a limited vocabulary.

Low English Proficiency

Low English proficiency, similar to previous studies (Jackson, 2002; Tsui, 1996), was another anxiety-provoker identified by the students in the present study. Statements like “my oral English is poor, and so when I want to speak it to somebody, I am always nervous” (Su, male) and “I’m

a little afraid of speaking English, because my speaking English is poor” (Li, male) occurred frequently in the students’ reflective journals.

Lack of Preparation

The analysis of the reflective journals revealed that a couple of students did not feel nervous at all even when speaking English without any preparation. For example, one student said, “I’m not nervous even if without preparation. In this [way] not only my spoken English can be practiced but also my self-confidence can be improved” (Wang, male). However, more students attributed their anxiety to lack of preparation and expressed that they would feel less anxious and more confident to speak English with preparation, similar to those students in Tsui’s (1996) study. This can be best illustrated by what Gong (male) reflected “I never want to speak English without preparation. But if I’m well prepared, I will not be nervous, and I can speak clearly.” “I am often nervous if asked to speak English without preparation, and it is much better if I am prepared”, acknowledged Li (male). It is clear that preparation could enhance students’ confidence in speaking English though it might not be able to get rid of anxiety.

Lack of Practice

Although the students were enrolled in *English Listening & Speaking* course, as EFL learners and especially non-English majors, they didn’t have much practice of oral English in class due to the limited class time and big class size, nor did they have many choices to speak the language in their daily life. As a result, lack of practice provoked much anxiety in many students when speaking English to others in class, like Hilleson’s (1996) and Tsui’s (1996) studies. “I am nervous maybe because I didn’t practice it and I am not used to it. Some are not anxious because they have experienced that many times before” (Liao, male). This view was shared by another student who reported “I feel nervous when I talk to others. In senior school, I hardly had a chance to talk to others in English. We learned English just for the College Entrance Examination. I’m afraid of speaking English out” (Qin, male).

Fear of Making Mistakes and being Laughed at

Probably influenced by the Confucian ideology that emphasizes perfect performance, the students in the present study also feared making mistakes and being laughed at, which made them (very) anxious when

speaking English to others in class, like previous studies (Jackson, 2002; Price, 1991; Tsui, 1996). “I’m nervous whether I get ready or not, for I’m worried about making mistakes” (Zhou, male). “I like to speak English, but when I am in front of others, I will be nervous and can’t say any words, because I am afraid others will laugh at me if I make some mistakes” (Liao, male).

Fear of Losing Face

Likewise, fear of losing face also caused many students to become anxious when speaking English in class. For example, one student stated, “I’m a little afraid to lose face, I’m shy. When I am speaking English in front of others, I feel nervous and I can’t say any words. Oh God, I have forgotten all the words that I learned” (Gong, male).

Fear of being Focus of Attention

Although many students started to learn spoken English in secondary schools, they didn’t have much practice at that time because of the strongly didactic nature of teaching and exam-orientedness of schooling. Consequently, many students feared being the focus of attention and thus became anxious when singled out to speak English in class, as a student explained, “I am often nervous when speaking English in front of others, because I think too many eyes were gazing at me. My God!” (Li, male).

Fear of being Unable to Follow and Understand Others

Just like the finding that incomprehensible input provoked great anxiety in many students in language classrooms (Hilleson, 1996; Price, 1991; Tsui, 1996), fear of being unable to follow and understand others caused many students in the present study to become anxious in oral English classrooms. “I’m often afraid that I can’t follow others or can’t understand what they said. So I feel anxious when speaking English” (Hou, male). Being unable to follow the teacher could make some students even more anxious, “I was very anxious when the teacher asked questions because I couldn’t understand her and I’m afraid that the teacher would ask me to answer questions” (Lin, male).

Inability to Express Ideas

Inability to express ideas was another cause for student anxiety in oral English classrooms. As a student reported, “sometimes I am afraid of talking to others. For I have no idea [of] how to express my meanings by the words I’ve learned. I’ll feel nervous when speaking in front of others because I’m afraid I would speak nothing and only stand there embarrassedly” (Ning, male). They became anxious also because they couldn’t translate their ideas from Chinese into English, “when I speak English in front of others, I’m nervous because I don’t know what to say or even if I know what to say, I can’t translate it into English or speak it smoothly” (Lin, female).

Memory Disassociation

Some students became nervous when speaking English in class because they couldn’t remember what they had learned or prepared. “Speaking English in front of others, I’m not afraid but ashamed for my poor speech. Always I forget the exact word to express my thought, in spite of an affluent vocabulary I have” (Sha, male). It might also be the case that anxiety led to memory loss, which provoked greater anxiety in students. However, it needs further exploration.

In addition, being unfamiliar with other students caused some students to be anxious, “I was a little anxious during pair work because I knew nobody in the classroom and felt lonely” (Wang, male). On the other hand, they wouldn’t feel so anxious if they knew one another. Moreover, difficulty of tasks was anxiety-provoking for some students in oral English classrooms, “if the topic is difficult, we will be anxious and nervous because we can’t express our ideas freely” (Liao, female). Personality was another factor. According to the participants, shy and introverted students became (more) anxious when speaking English to others in class, even in the mother tongue, whereas, extroverted students felt more confident and less anxious when doing so.

In conclusion, various factors such as a limited vocabulary, lack of practice, lack of preparation, fear of making mistakes and being laughed, and memory disassociation contributed to student anxiety in oral English classrooms. If the students were familiar with their partners and classmates, if they didn’t mind making mistakes and the task was not difficult, they felt much more relaxed and less anxious to speak English in class.

ANXIETY COPING STRATEGIES

As elaborated above, many students self-reported to be anxious when speaking English in class and were able to identify the causes for their anxiety. When asked to reflect on what strategies they had used to cope with anxiety in class, most of them, however, seemed to be at a loss. Only a couple of students reported that they had tried to tell themselves “don’t be nervous, don’t be nervous” before speaking English in class. Most of them had never thought about how to reduce anxiety and just depended on gradual change. They believed that they would feel less anxious and more confident to speak the language as they had more exposure to oral English. This might be because anxiety had not been much researched on or discussed in Mainland China, it didn’t capture enough attention from either EFL teachers or learners.

On the other hand, the students offered some suggestions for their peers such as having more practice and building up self-confidence. Some students thought of confidence to be crucial to reduce anxiety in learning English.

To reduce anxiety is to increase our confidence. First of all, we must study and study—to improve our English. Doing more reading, writing, listening and speaking can help a lot. To become confident, preparation is important. Good preparation can make good results, which will encourage us. We can see the progress. Bad preparation results in anxiety and worsens our performance (Gao, male).

They also suggested that English teachers should try to create a friendly, supportive and non-threatening classroom-learning environment in order to make students feel free to speak the language in class.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the analyses and discussions in the previous section, it can be concluded that anxiety, which was provoked by multiple variables such as lack of practice and low English proficiency, was prevalent among students in different classroom activities, even when they got prepared. However, most of the students seemed to be helpless about being anxious when speaking English in class. Consequently, it is necessary for English teachers to help them enhance their awareness of anxiety and find out coping strategies.

In order to help reduce student anxiety, first and foremost, English teachers themselves should be aware of the existence of anxiety among EFL learners and show empathy to them in class. Besides, teachers can also encourage students to share their feelings with one another. As Donley (1998) claimed, students might feel more comfortable in the language class if they found out that other students and their teacher empathized with their them and thus became more active.

In addition, as suggested by the students, English teachers should try to establish a friendly, supportive and non-threatening classroom-learning environment. It is important for teachers to be friendly rather than strict and critical in class, which helps to make students feel less intimidated to speak English, especially when responding to teachers. It is also useful for English teachers to design and organize various classroom activities to help students to get to know one another during the first few lessons. According to Shoemaker and Shoemaker (1991), these exercises such as name games, interest tags and birth signs serve as “‘ice-breakers’ or conversation starters”, which help students become better acquainted and build a feeling of membership in a group. In addition, English teachers should teach and train students to be supportive of one another in class. According to Bailey (1983) and Zou (2004), competition often caused students to become (more) anxious to speak the target language, while a supportive relationship among students usually made them feel free to do so in class.

EFL students should also be aware of and acknowledge the existence of anxiety when speaking English in class. After that, they might consciously take the initiative to seek strategies to cope with anxiety. It is important and useful for them to improve their English proficiency, expand vocabulary, have more oral practice of English, and get prepared for oral English lessons. All of these can be achieved as long as they can be hard-working and persistent.

In summary, it is necessary for both EFL teachers and learners to beware that anxiety is a serious issue for EFL learners and that a multitude of variables contributes to it in language classrooms. More importantly, they should realize the urgent need to search for strategies to help students reduce or even eliminate anxiety when speaking English in class. However, because both anxiety levels and anxiety-provoking variables may vary from context to context, more research is called for with different groups of learners in various situations to better understand the issue and promote the learning of oral English.

NOTES

1. The students were placed into different band groups ranging from 1 to 3 (band 1 is the lowest and band 3 the highest) according to their scores in the placement test upon entering the University. After a term's learning, they were often automatically promoted to a higher band group.

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